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MILOSZ MERTON, A BINARY STAR

Abstract: During his life in America Czesław Miłosz met many people but few of them were more important than a man whom he saw only twice – Thomas Merton. Miłosz and Merton corresponded regularly for almost ten years (1959–1960) and their letters, published in Polish and English, show two great minds involved in a deep and sincere dialogue, revealing their most intimate thoughts as well as fears and hopes. Close to each other, they nevertheless remained independent in their thinking. This article presents their exchanges on political issues such as the Cold War, the Civil Right Movement or communist Russia. It also describes how each of them perceived the changes in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council. Interesting parallels in their biographies are also mentioned.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Thomas Merton, 1960s, Second Vatican Council

The years Miłosz spent in America were marked by friendships that touched his life. Among his close friends was Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, writer, poet, spiritual authority of many Catholics, great supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war movement in the 1960s. Their friendship was rather peculiar – they met only twice, and for ten years (1959–1968) they only exchanged letters. Their correspondence was published both in English and Polish (Merton, Miłosz 1991; Merton, Miłosz 1997).[1] Today their relationship is mainly perceived through Miłosz's eyes, because the Polish poet lived longer and had a chance to write about his life in retrospect. He devoted two separate texts to Thomas Merton (1986: 184–187; 2004: 154–157).

The Miłosz-Merton correspondence has already been researched and led to surprising conclusions. For example, Szymik, a member of the Pol-

[1] I wish to express my gratitude to Agnieszka Kosińska, Czesław Miłosz's secretary, for the possibility of consulting the English edition of Miłosz-Merton correspondence [A.G.].

ish Catholic clergy, in his monograph on the theological aspects of Miłosz's poetry ascribes Merton the role of a clerical authority who sees Miłosz as a stubborn yet ultimately complying "parishioner." Szymik argues that Merton was "a guide in a cassock" offering the Polish poet "the Chrystological key as a solution to the problem of evil and suffering that obsessed Miłosz" (Szymik 1996: 73; trans. A.G.). Other authors are less radical in their opinions. For instance, Contino discovers in Merton's letters seeds that bore fruit much later in *Second Space* (2011).

This paper takes yet another approach presenting the Miłosz-Merton correspondence as an exchange of opinions on the political, social and religious turmoil of the 1960s. It focuses on such issues as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Second Vatican Council. It traces disagreements and mutual influences that found their way into Miłosz's and Merton's thinking as well as writing.

Miłosz and Merton: similarities and differences

Quite a few similarities can be traced in the authors' biographies, backgrounds and literary interests. First of all, Miłosz, born in 1911, was merely four years older than Merton. This means that both were affected by the same *zeitgeist*: the end of the Great War, the inter-war period, the Second World War. Miłosz, in spite of living in America for more than three decades, always regarded himself as a European. Merton is generally perceived as an American, yet we should bear in mind that he was born in France, spent his childhood there and attended secondary school in England, where he studied one year in Cambridge. Although he identified himself with America later in life, he did have a very strong experience of Europe. This experience must have been negative, as Merton wrote in his autobiography:

> it seemed to me that there was some kind of subtle poison in Europe, something that corrupted me, something the very thought and scent of which sickened me (…). The Europe I finally left for good in the late November 1934 was a sad and unquiet continent, full of forebodings (1999: 139, 141).

These statements sound catastrophic, reminiscent of the climate of Miłosz's poetry at that time: *A Poem on Frozen Time* (1934) or *Three Winters* (1936).

Both Miłosz and Merton visited Germany and witnessed early Nazism. Miłosz thus remembered the ominous aura of Nazi ideology during his stay in Paris in 1934:

> Günther, a young Nazi, used to recite his poems to me. They celebrated the age of chivalry, sacrifices and blood and they had the sound of clanking swords (…). But the day of the soccer match between France and Germany – it took place just after annexation of the Saar – I came home certain. German tourists, transported to the game by buses, filled one-third of the grandstands. Was this sport or disguised warfare? The disciplined yells and lifting of banners with the swastika – the aura in itself was so obvious, it would have been hard to remain indifferent (2002: 177, 179).

Merton's encounter with Nazis took place even earlier:

> One Sunday morning in the spring of 1932 I was hiking through the Rhine Valley. With a pack on my back I was wandering down a quiet country road among flowering apple orchards, near Koblenz. Suddenly a car appeared and came down the road very fast. Almost before I had taken full notice of it, I realized it was coming straight at me and instinctively jumped into the ditch. The car passed in a cloud of leaflets and from the ditch I glimpsed its occupants, six or seven youths screaming and shaking their fists. They were Nazis and it was election day. I was being invited to vote for Hitler, who was not yet in power. These were future officers in the SS (1975a: iii).

In their twenties both Miłosz and Merton reached pivotal decisions that seemed irrational to them and to their friends at the time. However, when Miłosz as an old man looked back at that moment, he claimed that "foolishness is necessary in all our designs, so that they are realized, awkwardly and incompletely" (1995: 9). Merton, aged twenty, having wasted one year at Clare College, Cambridge, womanizing and drinking, abandons his plans to become a diplomat, leaves the university, and goes to America (1999: 141–144). Miłosz, aged twenty-three, breaks with Jadwiga Waszkiewicz, possibly rejecting the promising stable future of a respectable lawyer in Vilnius, which could offer him free time to be a poet (Franaszek 2011: 180). Moreover, in their twenties both of them might have unintentionally become fathers, a possibility not ruled out by their biographers (Franaszek 2011: 182; Merton 1999: xii).

As young men both see themselves as "leftists," fascinated with social justice and class emancipation: Miłosz rejects the chauvinistic concepts and actions of the Polish National Democrats; Merton joins the Young

Communist League and assumes the party pseudonym "Frank Swift" (Merton 1999: 163).

Both Miłosz and Merton are fascinated with William Blake. Merton credits the English poet and visionary with his spiritual awakening that would lead him to the Catholic Church (1999: 97). In *The Land of Ulro* and other texts Miłosz refers to Blake's critical vision of modernity that concurred with his own views.

What distinguishes them is their religious background. Miłosz, whenever he speaks or writes about his life, recollects his Catholic education (2002: 69–91), describing his temperament as *contemplative* (2002: 85). Merton, the real contemplative, was an agnostic at best and a libertine at worst during his youth; he converted to Catholicism in his twenties (Merton 1999: 200–240). This difference is later visible in their responses to the dramatic changes in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council.

Miłosz in Merton's eyes

What did they think of each other and expect from each other in their letters? That question is not easy to answer, as the attitudes and themes that emerge in their letters change over time, reflecting dramatic social and political events in Europe and the USA, the Cold War climate of the 1960s. The correspondence was initiated by Merton, who wrote to Miłosz, living in France, on December 6, 1958, to express his enthusiasm after reading *The Captive Mind*. This book was to Merton, in his own words, "one of the most intelligent and stimulating" books he had read for a long time, offering "a third position, a position of integrity," neither communist nor anti-communist (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 3). But is one book by an unknown writer enough to sustain a long-lasting friendship? Something else must have been appealing, probably the fact that Miłosz came from the "other world." Not an American, yet not a typical European either, someone from such obscure places as Lithuania or Poland, Miłosz may have been a mysterious and exotic "other" to Merton. Merton's attraction to Miłosz reflects his own interest in individuals, mainly writers and artists, who represent non-American culture and opinions. As it turns out, while he was corresponding with Miłosz, he was also exchanging letters with other intellectuals, including numerous Latin American writers, almost forgotten today,

such as Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Napoleon Chow, José Coronel Urtecho and others (Merton 2008: 140–160). As Merton himself remarked, Miłosz was for him, at least in the beginning, yet another individual, who is not "an inert captive of Calypso's Island where no one is ever tempted to think and where one just eats and exists and supports the supermarket and the drug store and General Motors and the TV" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 94–95). However, in another letter Merton wrote: "I am solitary enough to value any genuine contact highly, and I assure you I have not very many" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 76). This last declaration suggests that, despite his voluminous correspondence and various pen pals, Merton regarded Miłosz as somebody special.

Nonetheless, what attracted Merton to Miłosz most was the Polish writer's positioning behind the Iron Curtain. Before writing to the Polish poet, Merton corresponded briefly with Boris Pasternak (Merton 2008: 104–112) and was probably interested in the possibility of becoming acquainted with yet another writer who experienced the heart of darkness or at least its vicinity. Miłosz, who answers Merton's questions concerning Alpha, Beta and Gamma, is to the American monk primarily a source of information on the life of intellectuals in the countries under the Soviet domination, a keyhole to that locked world. At that stage Miłosz as a poet does not interest Merton much. Commenting on Pasternak's refusal to accept the Nobel Prize in a letter to the future recipient of that award, Merton wrote: "It is a shame that you write poems that cannot be translated…" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 57).

With time the political issues that lay at the beginning of their correspondence become replaced by the problems of evil, suffering and human sinfulness. Miłosz writes with amazing frankness about these most fundamental aspects of human condition and discloses his personal doubts, fears and weaknesses as if he were making his confession to Merton. Yet the American monk, contrary to what is suggested by Szymik, never treats him as a penitent. Miłosz never gives up asking him questions and presenting arguments that cannot be easily dismissed. Ironically, Merton, one of the most celebrated Catholic writers and spiritual guides of that period, an author of many bestselling books on theology and spirituality, confides in Miłosz: "I have not coped with the basic theological questions. It only looks that way. (…) I have given the impression I had answers" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 120–121).

Merton in Miłosz's eyes

The Captive Mind – so fascinating to Merton – made Miłosz famous in the West but that was not the fame he wanted. Many Western readers of the book perceived him wrongly not only as a critic of the communist system but also a staunch anticommunist, and therefore identified him with the political right. This pigeonholing frustrated Miłosz. What was even worse, when the book was published in English, the Polish poet was still living in France, the country whose intellectuals and politicians, infatuated with the Soviet system, were hostile to anyone who dared to criticize communism (an example of this attitude might be the famous conflict between Camus and Sartre concerning the Soviet Russia). Surrounded by those who did not share his political experiences and opinions (his only support was the *Kultura* journal and Jerzy Giedroyc), a poet in exile, separated by the Iron Curtain from his Polish readers, Miłosz in his late forties was a despaired and embittered man. As he wrote in 1962 recollecting this difficult time:

> When I couldn't do without alcohol, I drove myself on alcohol
> When I couldn't do without cigarettes and coffee, I drove myself
> on cigarettes and coffee (1996: 171)

Merton's letter seems to have been a life buoy to Miłosz. The letter itself was not very long: merely two pages in print suggesting that Merton is not so much interested in Miłosz himself as in the characters from his book: Alfa, Beta and Gamma. Miłosz's reply is three times longer, six dense pages, which illustrates how much he longed for a kindred spirit. Miłosz sees in Merton one of the few people who could understand him; therefore, in the very first line of his eager response he declares: "I feel that [your letter] created already a tie between us" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 6)

When Miłosz moves to California in 1960, this tie becomes even more important. As he confessed to Aleksander Fiut in 1979:

> America is the land of great loneliness. You have to be very strong to survive such loneliness as it is in America. (…) [in America] you are very lonely and all relations with other people are superficial (Miłosz, Fiut 2003: 117; trans. A.G.).[2]

[2] Fiut's conversation with Miłosz on America was not included into the English version of his conversations with Miłosz: cf. Miłosz 1987.

Miłosz' sincerity permeating his letters to Merton as well as his openness whenever he speaks of his inner doubts and tribulations prove that the correspondence helped him to survive his loneliness. He did not trust American intellectuals and rejected their diagnosis of the current condition of the Western civilization:

> [I] am now surrounded by new Thoreaus who differ from their spiritual forebear in considering the "quiet desperation" of their millions of fellow citizens to be the result of an increasingly cybernetic civilization, and who, while spitefully awaiting that direction to be proven wrong, quote Nietzsche or Marx, or something lifted from biology on the birth and withering of organisms (Miłosz 1983: 121).

He seemed to trust Merton and even if he did not agree on everything with the American Trappist, he did not reject his opinions entirely. A European living in America, he needed to confront that experience with somebody who was also brought up in Europe and left it for America. Paradoxically, Merton, although living in enclosure, was a better candidate for that confrontation than Giedroyc or Vincenz, Miłosz's European friends who had no experiential knowledge about America in the 1960s. The Polish poet's numerous French inclusions in his letter to the American monk may testify how significant this European trait in Merton was to Miłosz. On the one hand, they may prove that Miłosz had difficulties in expressing himself precisely in English or did not feel confident enough in that language and therefore resorted to French.[3] On the other hand, they may just as well suggest a conscious or unconscious wish to stress the common European ground shared with Merton.[4]

We should also bear in mind that Merton, as a Catholic priest, epitomizes the Catholic Church and her tradition, a constant point of reference to Miłosz. There were certain Catholic priests, such as Fr. Leopold Chomski or Fr. Maksymilian Kolbe, who left bad memories in his mind. There were also others, whom Miłosz regarded as his friends, such as a Polish Pallotine

[3] For a discussion of Miłosz's problems with English see Ward 2013 [editor's note].

[4] In the letter of October 5, 1961 (written less than one year after his move to the USA) Miłosz refers to the term *precarity*, commenting that he was not sure whether it existed in English and adding that he meant something similar to the French term *précaire* (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 132). There are more than thirty French phrases in Miłosz's letters to Merton, but practically none in Merton's letters to Miłosz. Examples from Miłosz's letters include such expressions as *a spirit of légereté, bien pensants*, *Je vous embrasse*, *gratte menton*, *je me méfie*, *au fond* or *les ricaneurs*.

residing in France, Fr. Józef Sadzik (who talked Miłosz into translating *The Book of Psalms* into Polish). Robert Faggen, the editor of the letters published in English, claims in his introduction that the correspondence reveals Miłosz's need for a spiritual father, who would lead him out of his own egotism and the conviction that the world is ruled by an evil demiurge (Merton, Miłosz 1997: vii). Joanna Gromek, the author of the preface to the Polish edition, presents a slightly different point of view. Yes, Miłosz did want to see in Merton a master and a spiritual teacher, yet soon their roles reverse: the disciple turns out to be quite stubborn and it is the master who asks him for advice (Merton, Miłosz 1991: 8).

It is also worth adding that Miłosz, unlike thousands of Catholics around the world at the time, including Polish Catholics, was not a great enthusiast of Merton as a spiritual writer. When the American monk (maybe out of vanity – who knows) asked Miłosz what he thought of his bestseller *The Sign of Jonas*, the Polish poet explained that usefulness of this book was limited for somebody who was seriously interested in the "anatomy of faith" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 60). This is one of the many examples of the candid critique the correspondents offered to each other (Merton 2008: 120). Many years later Miłosz would write that, compared to Simon Weil's diamond-sharp prose, Merton's style seemed to him not precise enough, a bit vegetarian (1986: 186). In another essay though, written towards the end of his life, Miłosz presented Merton as one of the few fair figures of the 20th century, whose creative thought helped good conquer evil.

Attitude towards Russia

The Captive Mind started Miłosz and Merton's intense exchange on communist Russia. Miłosz's view is well known. Merton at first looks with abhorrence at American anti-communism manifested by the government and the majority of the American society. He considers it a paranoia and writes numerous texts in which he declares his commitment to peace (see below). He is aware of the inhuman nature of the communist system that has enslaved half of the globe, yet at the same time he seems to be a bit naïve. For example, in his letter of October 1958 to Aleksiei Surkov, the head of the Soviet Writers' Union (written merely two months before his first letter to Miłosz) Merton protests against their expulsion of Boris Pasternak after the Soviet writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature:

> I am writing this letter to you today as a sincere friend of literature wherever it may be found, including Russia. I write to you assuming that you are, as I am, interested in the future of man. I assume that we both attach supreme importance to basic human values, in spite of the diversity in the means which we take to protect them (Merton 2008: 112).

When Merton wrote to Miłosz about his fascination with Pasternak, and through Pasternak with Russia, his declaration met with Miłosz's sharp reaction: "You know that I am sceptical about Russia – in spite of Boris Pasternak. What Russia is no Westerner knows – only some Russians and some Poles do" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 83). These words must have been like a cold shower to the well-meaning American monk.

Cold war hysteria and the Civil Rights Movement

Both Miłosz and Merton were acutely aware of the fact that they were living during the deadly confrontation between two superpowers that served their citizens distorted images of their enemy. Both writers saw madness and possible devastating consequences of the Cold War hysteria; both came to the conclusion that a different attitude was necessary, one that Merton discovered in Miłosz, an attitude that "refuses subjection to the pressures of the two massive groups ranged against each other in the world" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 3, 4). Merton added in another letter:

> I agree with you with all my heart in feeling revulsion at the standard, superficial attitude taken by "the west" on the common, political and social level, to Russia, etc. Revulsion in fact at the hypocrisy on both sides (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 15).

Miłosz, while still in France, remarked sarcastically that certain writers "eat only if they 'work in anti-communism,' poor slaves of their fear, no more free than their brothers in communist countries" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 22–23).

While their declarations were similar, they differed when it came to actions. Miłosz preferred to see himself as a meditative poet. Such an attitude was "a far cry from the poet of action, the poet actively involved in history. I never wanted to be involved in history" (Miłosz 1987: 329). Therefore, he was very skeptical seeing Merton's involvement in anti-war campaigns and wrote to him:

> I am completely puzzled by your papers on duties of a Christian and on war. Perhaps I am wrong. My reaction is emotional: no. Reasons: 1) My deep skepticism as to moral action which seems to be utopian. 2) My mistrust of any peace movements, a distrust shared probably by all the Poles, as we experienced to what use various peace movements served. (…) I ask myself why you feel such an itch for activity? (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 138)

What *activity* did Miłosz mean here? Merton, despite his formal separation from the world as a monk, was nevertheless involved in many initiatives and protests against war in Vietnam and the Cold War propaganda. Because his essays very often countered the opinions of American Catholics and the Catholic hierarchy in the USA, his superiors forbade him once to publish any further texts devoted to peace or war.

Miłosz's remarks on how politically naïve it may be to defend peace at any cost did not convince Merton, who replied to the Polish poet that he owed this attitude to his own conscience (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 146). In the same letter Merton declared: "There are few people whose advice I respect as much as I do yours and whatever you say I take it seriously" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 146). However, in spite of the declaration, this very letter to Miłosz became "Cold War Letter 56," one of the collection of letters concerning peace, which Merton was writing to various people at the time. The collection, entitled *Cold War Letters*, was later mimeographed by Merton himself and circulated among his friends. Thanks to that monastic *samizdat* Merton found a way around the ban on publishing anything about current American policy (Merton 1997: 6; Merton 2008: 139).

The 1960s in America are associated not only with the Vietnam War but also with the Civil Rights Movement, which is also reflected in Miłosz-Merton correspondence (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 163–164). Both writers agreed that, given the tense social situation, the acceptance of social and political equality manifested by many whites was very often merely a hypocrisy and a cover for dislike and contempt. Miłosz and Merton wrote texts where they developed the ideas from their letters: Merton composed *The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal* (Merton 1997: 154–189) and Miłosz wrote a very pessimistic essay "The Black."[5]

[5] This text was not published in the English version of *San Francisco Bay Visions* (cf. Miłosz 2000b: 135–141 and Miłosz 1983).

The Second Vatican Council

Miłosz and Merton reacted differently to the radical changes in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). To Miłosz, the Council and its aftermath was nothing more but a mad and senseless protestantization of the Catholicism and he predicted that "the number of homeless religious minds will be rapidly increasing" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 173). In his next letter he commented sarcastically: "All I know is that a church building in America is now at last what it aspired to be for a long time: a place of genuinely American, Boy-Scoutish cheerfulness" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 174).

Merton looked at the changes in the Church more optimistically, stressing sincerity and honesty of those involved in the ecclesiastical revolution. Once again, as in the case of the Cold War propaganda, we can see a clash between Miłosz's pessimism and religious conservatism, and Merton's optimism, even if not well grounded. The difference of opinions may be ascribed to the writers' different backgrounds and biographies, as it was suggested earlier. Merton was not enslaved by the Catholicism of ancient forms and rituals; he converted as an adult and thus could easily shed it. Miłosz knew that Catholicism was part of his most basic identity, as he remarked bitterly in *A Theological Treatise*: "Alas, an American saying has applied to me, though it was not coined with kindly intent: 'Once a Catholic, always a Catholic'" (2005: 67).

Ten years earlier in "Capri," a poem that may be read as a summary of his own life, he confessed:

> I am a child who receives First Communion in Wilno and
> afterwards drinks cocoa served by zealous Catholic ladies.
> I am an old man who remembers that day in June: the ecstasy
> of the sinless, white tablecloth and the sun on the vases filled with
> peonies.
>
> (Miłosz 1995: 8)

A child who receives First Communion, *a pious boy* – if he were to recant his faith, he would have had to recant himself. That is why, commenting on the Second Vatican Council in *The Land of Ulro*, he wrote peevishly:

> Never was the damage inflicted so great as in the postwar years, notably in the sixties. This was a time when theologians, Catholics included, casting them-

> selves as clowns gleefully proclaimed that Christianity, hitherto in opposition to the world, was now both with and in the world. Meanwhile, their audience, beholders of a spectacle more pathetic than funny took this to mean that Christians wished to be "the same as others" that is to give up their Christianity (2000a: 248–249)

Miłosz published *The Land of Ulro* in 1977, nine years after Merton's death, and we will never know what his reply to Miłosz might have been.

A binary star

They met personally only twice. Miłosz visited Merton in Kentucky in the early 1960s; Merton came to San Francisco in 1968, shortly before his journey to Asia, where he died accidentally electrocuted having touched an exposed wire during a shower in a Bangkok hotel. He had sent one of his last postcards to Miłosz and the postcard closes their correspondence (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 178; Merton 1975b: 160).

"A binary star" is a term in astronomy referring to two stars trapped in each other's gravitational forces, which orbit around their common centre of mass affecting each other. Miłosz and Merton are such "a binary star," revolving in their letters around issues, questions and doubts that burdened both of them, yet at the same time keeping a safe distance, independent in their thinking. Merton – who sometimes must have felt like a prisoner in the monastery of his own choice, when so many things were going on *extra muros* – was learning from Miłosz a broader perspective and distance paradoxically not attainable to a Trappist monk living in enclosure. Miłosz, "a secret taster of Manichean poisons," could find in Merton's words an antidote to his *delectatio morosa* and his experience of the horror of the world. The letters circulating between California and Kentucky soothed restless trajectories of these two hot stars.

They still shine in their correspondence.

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